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ABSTRACT

Although the principal is critical for the success of the school and the school district, many school districts lack a structured and systematic means for identifying and selecting principals. This paper presents a collaborative model for principal selection, which is based on a valid job description, advertisement of the position, interview analysis, stress activity, and references. Implementation of this model in several Kentucky school systems indicates that the system is particularly effective in small, rural districts. A conclusion is that the system is useful in making valid, objective decisions in principal selection. (22 references) (LMI)

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A COLLABORATIVE MODEL FOR PRINCIPAL SELECTION

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ABSTRACT

Numerous national reports indicate more than fifty percent of practicing educational administrators will leave the profession in the next decade. Such a dramatic turnover will have a profound impact on the availability of quality potential administrators. Research generated during the past decade highlights the increasingly critical role of the school principal to the school's mission and the achievement level of students. Although numerous potential administrators have administrative certification from institutions of higher education, most completed a program five to ten years ago without the benefit of instruction and training in the concepts of instructional leadership.

Although the position of principal is critical to the success of the school and the school district, many school districts do not have a structured, systematic means for identifying and selecting principals. The model herein described illustrates a simple, yet effective plan for meeting this obvious deficiency. The model includes a valid job description, advertisement of the position, interview analysis, stress activity and references. Preliminary results indicate good success with the model.

A COLLABORATIVE MODEL FOR PRINCIPAL SELECTION

The decade of the 1980's has produced a plethora of reports regarding the school principal's increased responsibility and critical role in both school effectiveness and school improvement (McPherson, 1982). In fact, much research contends that the principal is the most significant position in the school system (Trump, 1987). As the principal's responsibility has increased, so has the pressure on school boards and superintendents to make pertinent appointments when principal vacancies transpire, because reflecting on employing better principals after selection, is ludicrous.

Therefore, the question becomes, is there a better model, a better alternative to the selection procedures so often used in school systems today? Is there a viable alternative to the typical "good-ole-boys" network mentality which seems to permeate so much of educational administration, particularly hiring practices? Although not perfect, the model herein presented is intended to facilitate decision-making by superintendents, thereby enabling them to achieve more valid results when employing prospective principals.

INTRODUCTION

Although the complexity of the principalship has increased dramatically, ironically, relatively little is understood

regarding principal identification or subsequent selection (Zakariya, 1983). Three prevalent societal factors impinge on the selection of future principals. First, the principal is currently regarded as being "in the middle". The principal is conventionally perceived as a true middle manager, being bombarded from above by superintendents and school boards, from below by teachers, and from both sides by parents, community, and students. Additionally, continuing educational reform emphasizes the instructional leadership role for the principal, which is dissimilar to those functions practiced by many current administrators. School boards and superintendents envision principals implementing administrative policy, while teachers demand curriculum improvement, and students anticipate a supportive climate (McGiffin, 1988). Add the conflict inherent in collective bargaining, and abruptly the principalship is not the attractive quintessence some perceive (Summy, 1986).

Secondly, societal pressures dictate that more women and minorities be appointed to the principalship. Research indicates women and minorities account for less than ten percent of all principalships (Peterson & Finn, 1985). Although many areas may not have significant minority populations, the majority of employees in most school districts are female and deserve consideration.

The third social factor, age, is significant since approximately fifty percent of all currently employed principals are age fifty-five (55) or over (Finn, 1986). Consequently, the

most dramatic administrative turnover in educational history will eventuate during the ensuing decade. With the anticipation of such dramatic changes, school districts are encouraged to generate germane principal selection procedures and techniques.

PURPOSES

There are five primary purposes a specific selection procedure accomplishes when making selections for administrative positions. The first and most logical reason for a formal selection procedure is to cultivate a pool of candidates who meet the qualifications established by the local school district. Secondly, the procedure should distinguish candidates who have a high probability of success as a principal. Selecting personnel with an inclination for persisting with the school system is the third reason for a formal selection procedure. Fourth, potential candidates should be assessed based on their potential for effective contributions to both school and organizational goals. Lastly, selection procedures should discriminate candidates who are sufficiently motivated for self-development.

The major objective of principal selection is to recognize and subsequently employ persons who are capable of successfully developing, implementing, and coordinating programs to educate children. With the financial constraints hampering many school districts, the selection process can prove very costly, if, the appropriate person is not employed. Thus, a

rational system of principal selection which provides a pool of competent candidates is critical (Sashkin & Huddle, 1988). In addition, local boards of education are provided with a more objective means for improving the quality of administrators in the district and the superintendent is concurrently provided with a formula which exculpates personnel selections.

STEPS IN THE SELECTION PROCESS

The model herein described is created to provide school districts with a principal selection procedure appropriate for most administrative vacancies. The model is not proposed as a single information source, but as a process insuring both accountability and structure. School districts are encouraged to validate all steps contained in the model to substantiate state and local employment statutes and regulations.

Whether this model or some other is utilized, a specific, systematic procedure should be initiated and implemented at the local level to insure credibility in the administrative selection process. Both school board policy and administrative regulations regarding screening and selecting any employee, especially administrators, should be sanctioned locally. As more administrative vacancies occur in the near future, the strategy for screening and selection will become increasingly critical to all school districts. Superintendents often complain about an inability to justify the time required to interview thirty

principal applicants; conversely, they cannot take the chance of overlooking the best candidate by not having a standardized screening and selection procedure. In today's dynamic educational climate the possibility of excluding potentially capable administrators is too great to be left to a chance process. Without a sanctioned process, many constituent groups or individuals may also perceive an inability to significantly impact decisions regarding future principals (Herzog, 1984). Utilizing this model would allow groups or individuals to voice concerns or opinions as each step in the process continues.

JOB DESCRIPTION

Job descriptions are the first step in the process and are imperative to the success of any educational position, particularly the principalship. Job descriptions should be developed for each principalship position, as they provide the foundation for the entire selection process. Job descriptions furnish a benchmark for comparison, enabling all candidates to be judged against common criteria, not some hypothetical rendition of "what should be." The job description should be explicit, organized, and an accurate reflection of duties and responsibilities assigned to the principal.

ADVERTISEMENT

Although many school districts have negotiated employee contracts, every effort should be made to advertise to the widest market possible. National or regional searches may prove futile for rural, isolated school systems, but state and surrounding area searches are quite often productive in unearthing a quality pool of applicants. Advertisements can be in local or state circulation newspapers, national and/or state administrator newsletters, university placement services, private placement services, or word-of-mouth. However, accurate and timely advertisements are critical to both the quality and quantity of applicants in the selection process.

Once the pool of applicants has been identified, several tools can be utilized to gather information about the prospective principals. However, please be warned, no instrument alone can accurately determine the candidate's ability or potential. The applicability of any instrument is in conjunction with other procedures designed to provide an insight into the "fit" between the candidate and the school district (Wynne, 1987). Without an objective, written measure there is often an over-reliance on non-specific determiners of "fit" (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983). Typically, the tendency is to rely on personal perceptions of a candidate's physical looks, personal projection, confidence, and assertiveness (Baehler, 1987). Consequently, this local version of "fit" frequently prevents a realistic assessment of outside

candidates, particularly women and minorities (Thomas, 1986).

INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

Perhaps more has been discussed and written about the oral interview than any other phase of the selection process (Donaghy, 1984). And yet, there is still immense concern regarding the inability of the oral interview to predict success on the job. All personnel administrators and superintendents can share "war stories" about candidates who were brilliant in the interview, but bombed miserably as a principal. Despite the obvious deficiencies however, the interview remains the dominant component of most principal selection procedures (Tengler & Jablin, 1983). The interview is designed to acquaint the school district with the applicant, and hopefully, the applicant with the school district. For many applicants, particularly those outside the district, this awareness stage is critical to their positive perception of the school district.

Consequently, the interview should be structured, scheduled, and not handled in a haphazard manner. Most researchers agree that principalship interviews should be conducted by an interview committee rather than by one administrator. Oral interviews should be of two general types, the standardized and the open-ended (Donaghy, 1984). In the standardized interview, consistent questions are asked each applicant permitting a comparison of answers. The open-ended questioning section of the

interview allows the candidate to express opinions, beliefs, and attitudes about topics introduced by the interviewers or the candidate.

The interview process accords the interview team an indication of several behaviors desired in the principalship; i.e. organizational ability, capacity to think quickly, verbal expression, aptitude for meeting deadlines, and interpersonal relations (Engel & Erion, 1984). The basic belief is "the best predictor of future success is past success" (Stewart & Cash, 1985).

STRESS

Many superintendents and school boards have recently expressed a urgency for additional knowledge concerning the criteria that should be utilized with principal selection procedures (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1984). One concept that has received considerable attention is the assessment center procedure. Assessment centers are designed to provide enhanced performance information regarding candidates, typically as they respond to stressful situations or simulations. The most widely utilized assessment center model for principals was developed by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP). Originally implemented during 1975, NASSP assessment centers have assessed thousands of candidates

throughout the United States and three foreign countries (Erlandson & Gonzalez, 1988). The NASSP assessment centers evaluate candidates in twelve generic skill dimensions which have been empirically determined, court validated, and are measured by various exercises and simulations (Landholm, 1986). The primary purpose of the assessment center is to provide more objective data to local school districts for assistance in screening prospective principal candidates. The NASSP assessment centers do not recommend employment or advise local school systems on who to employ, rather, the centers provide data on the candidates that can be used by the local school districts in conjunction with other data sources, thereby ensuing employment of the best possible candidate (Erlandson, 1987). This objective data is especially critical to small rural school districts who must make crucial employment decisions, often with limited knowledge of the candidate's ability.

REFERENCES

References are the most widely used and grossly abused element of the selection process. However, at this point in the process the superintendent should assume the responsibility for contacting previous employers to obtain expanded appraisals of the candidates. Especially when selecting prospective principals, superintendents or the administrative team should carefully validate the academic degrees and certification of

candidates (Goldstein, 1986). If this step can be accomplished during the interview, the time savings for the superintendent would be advantageous. Letters of reference are typically not useful at best, they indicate only a candidate's ability to request and obtain such a letter not the candidate's potential on the job. Most letters of reference address personal attributes and are not valid indicators of future performance (Stewart & Cash, 1985). Rather than relying on letters of reference, the superintendent should make follow-up telephone calls to selected references or contacts. Although this is not a fool proof approach, many persons are more willing to discuss a candidate by telephone than in writing.

When the information from the reference check is compiled with the other documentation collected in the selection process, the superintendent makes an employment recommendation to the school board. All candidates, regardless of their standing in the process, are notified of the decision.

IN OPERATION

The concept sounds great in theory, but does it actually work in practice? Several school systems in Kentucky have implemented this alternative model and preliminary findings indicate that the system works well, particularly for small, rural districts. Potential principals are given a renewed sense of personal integrity in the selection process and those making

the selections indicate that the candidates are better prepared for the reality of the principalship.

Although the results appear favorable, potential adopters should be weary of two points. First, this process demands a considerable amount of time and energy; it does not happen without advance preparation. Second, superiors making the personnel decisions must be aware of the implications for boosting or destroying teacher morale by this program. However, experience has shown that it is "cheaper" to hurt the morale of a teacher than to have an ineffective principal destroy a school.

CONCLUSION

Research reported during the past decade illustrates the increasingly important role of the school principal. Because of the principal's value, principal selection procedures have also become more critical to school districts. School systems are encouraged to adopt systematic, rational means for principal selection. By using such a system, superintendents can make more valid, objective decisions when selecting future principals.

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